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TAGS: PREL PHUM PINR PGOV AE
SUBJECT: LITTLE CHATTER ABOUT SHEIKH ISSA (C-NE9-01124)

REF: A) STATE 52186, B) ABU DHABI 553, C) ABU DHABI 481, D) ABU DHABI 423

Classified by Ambassador Richard Olson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The non-existent public commentary on the Sheikh Issa affair (ref C) is mirrored by very limited discussion even in private. Post offers the following as a partial response to questions raised in ref A. End summary.

BIO DATA

¶2. (C) Issa, the seventh son of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan (first president of the UAE who died in 2004), was born in 1966. His mother, Amina bint Saleh al Darmaki, was Sheikh Zayed's sixth wife and the couple had three children before they divorced: Issa, Nasser (born 1969 - died 2008), and Rhoda (born 1970). Nasser, Issa's only full brother, died in a helicopter crash on 6/2/2008. Nasser had a reputation for enjoying a party lifestyle, had no serious government function, and may have been piloting the helicopter in which he died along with four others (one AmCit included). Issa seems to enjoy his royal status with minimal government responsibility -- which is in itself an indication of his marginal stature within the family. Post has no information on Sheikh Issa's own children, who are likely not yet of marriageable age.

¶3. (C) Issa does not currently hold a position in the UAEG, although he briefly served as Under Secretary for Public Works. He prefers, according to websites, to position himself as a "successful real estate developer" although there is little evidence of his success in this arena. In 2005, he established Pearl Properties, an Abu Dhabi based development company. Its mission was to develop "highly innovative and visionary real estate projects in the residential, commercial, and retail sectors of the UAE market". Its first major development project, The Palisades, was launched in November 2006 and was promoted as "Dubai's largest area of urban landscaped parkland". The project never made it off the ground and investors, to no avail, continue to demand returns on their investment or refunds. Angry investors even started a Facebook page to air their grievances.

¶4. (SBU) Another major Pearl Properties project is Al Hekma Tower, a 61-storey tower to be constructed as an homage to Sheikh Issa's father, Sheikh Zayed. The name means "The Wisdom Tower" in Arabic and is expected to "proudly display an image of the late ruler" and be a monument from his "devoted son". In keeping with the Emirati fixation with hyperbole, the portrait of Sheikh Zayed on the tower would be the "largest portrait of a single individual to be seen on any building in the Middle East". Like The Palisades, Al Hekma Tower has yet to get off the ground.

REACTIONS TO THE TORTURE TAPES

¶5. (SBU) On May 11, 2009, WAM publicly named Sheikh Issa bin Zayed al Nahyan as the man torturing Afghani grain dealer, Mr. Mohamed Poor, in a much publicized video. The statement went on to say, "the Public Prosecution Office has officially launched a criminal investigation into the events depicted on video and detained Sheikh

Issa bin Zayed al Nahyan pending this investigation." Local papers have not commented on that statement, which was subsequently removed from the official WAM website.

¶6. (C) We have heard very little chatter on the video from UAEG officials; refs B and D represent comments made when we specifically asked about the case with senior officials. The reactions of low to mid level officials have been mixed: some think the video is old news and do not understand why so much fuss is being made at this time; some dismiss it as the bad behavior of a spoiled sheikh; many feel that this could never have happened were Sheikh Zayed still alive. Indeed, many Emiratis, conscious of their country's public image, wonder if the release of the video at this time is not simply designed to tarnish the image of the UAE. Many also express confidence that the matter of the torture is closed because it was likely taken care of within the family. The local press continues to be quiet on the matter.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Although there is not much public chatter from Emiratis, it is obvious that the attention the video has received is a source of tremendous embarrassment for many Emiratis. The AmCit who brought the tapes to light notes that Issa's behavior changed for the worse when his father -- a strict enforcer of family standards -- passed away in 2004. End Comment
OLSON